

Chapter 11: The Evaluation Report

This chapter provides information relevant to the evaluation report. Discussions include selecting the evaluation author, determining the evaluation audience, practical information on the content of various evaluation reports, and finally, presenting and disseminating the evaluation report.

The Evaluation Author

The first thing to determine is who is going to write the evaluation report. This person should have been selected during the planning phase of the evaluation and should serve on the evaluation team. The person responsible for writing the evaluation report should consult with the team while writing the report. When the report is finished, the team should also review the final document before it is released.

“We hired an outside evaluator to look at how employees and board members worked together. We received a several-page report stating perceived problems. Steps have been taken to clear up those problems, but the main problem was never mentioned in the report. Some good things have come of the evaluation; for example, the lighting was changed.”

Some evaluation reports will have one author, while others will share authorship. Determining the order of authorship (if there is more than one author) should also

be decided during the planning stages to avoid later disputes. According to the American Psychological Association’s Guidelines for Authorship (Fine and Kurdek 1993), authorship should be conferred on all individuals who make a substantial contribution to the document, commensurate with education and experience.

The Report’s Audience

The evaluation report provides information to decisionmakers (Morris, Fitz-Gibbon, and Freeman 1987). However, different people will want different information, even to answer the same question. In addition, some users will expect the evaluation report to support a specific point of view. Therefore, it is important to identify decisionmakers’ opinions early on in order to anticipate potential controversies and to design reporting procedures that take them into account. Furthermore, understanding the audience’s motivations facilitates influencing them with the evaluation report.

Before the report is written (and preferably while planning the evaluation), the evaluation team should determine the users of the report. Potential audiences might include service providers, direct sponsors (grantors), indirect sponsors (legislature), special interest groups, researchers and other scholars, journalists, prominent political leaders, and the multidisciplinary team (MDT).¹

Once the readership has been identified, the team can determine what information the readers will need and why by asking the following questions:

- Who are the key people?
- What do the key people want to know?
- What do the key people consider acceptable criteria for program success?
- What is the best means of communicating with the key people?
- Which issues do key people perceive as important?

What evaluators need to know about the audience

After creating an audience list and identifying some characteristics about the audience, the team should consider what it knows about all audience members, such as the following:

- Their philosophy of evaluations.
- Their relationship to the program.
- Their relevant personal characteristics.
- Their preference for communication forms and style.
- Their political affiliations.

This kind of information can be entered into a table for easy access (for an example, see exhibit 11.1). Be sure to elicit information from all team members about the audience because each team member may have a different, useful perspective.

Timeliness of and timetables for evaluation reports

Late reports may not be used or will be used less effectively in making decisions. Therefore, all reports must be completed

on time to ensure they are useful. One method for ensuring timely reports is to obtain a commitment from the report's author that reports will be submitted on time; this stipulation may be in the statement of work (see chapter 3).

Effective reporting and communication must be ongoing throughout the evaluation. Periodic reports are useful for updating the audience and making incremental changes if necessary. The final report is necessary for summarizing and disseminating the big picture. While planning the evaluation, determine how often periodic reports will be generated and when the final report will be completed.

One difficulty with scheduling report due dates is that different users of the report may need the report at different times. Therefore, during the planning stages—

- Ask each user what information will be needed, and when.
- Determine when you can provide relevant information to the audience.
- Provide the audience with a schedule so they know when to expect reports (see exhibit 11.2).
- Develop a scheduling form that is clearly understood by the intended users.

The Content of the Evaluation Report

Below are some excellent tips for writing the evaluation report. However, the report should meet the needs of your audience. For example, a detailed analysis of the evaluation design might be of little interest to decisionmakers who are interested in the implications of the evaluation. However, when requesting future or further funding for the evaluation, the design of the evaluation will be critical.

The evaluation report should not look like a research report. However, the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation states that standards in reporting research require full and frank disclosure of all results (Scriven 1993). This statement implies that the evaluation team must remember its mistakes, make note of them, and report those that may affect the evaluation.

The following are nine elements of a good evaluation report (Scriven 1993):

- **The report should always answer the question “So what?”** This is the first thing that a reader should learn from your report. Explain to the reader the overall purpose of the evaluation, the major findings, and what they mean.
- **The presentation of data should be standardized.** A report is more efficient and easier to understand if the results are presented in a consistent format.
- **The report should be comprehensible.** Jargon reduces the writer’s ability to communicate clearly to those who are not members of his or her particular profession; for example, never use the terms “independent variable” or “dependent variable” in a report.
- **The report should be based on information from credible sources.** Collecting data from the right sources, regardless of the method employed, builds trust in the report.
- **The report should be concise.** The report should be as straightforward as possible.
- **The report should provide recommendations.** Always provide possible solutions for problems rather than just the negative results. Also, negative outcomes should include anecdotal explanations derived from conversations with colleagues and staff.
- **The report should integrate into the conclusion a consideration of unexpected outcomes.** Report both positive and negative unexpected results and possible explanations for their occurrence and why the results were not anticipated.
- **The report should discuss the generalizability of the findings.** Discuss whether the individuals who participated in the evaluation are the same as or different from clients in general on important characteristics.
- **The report should discuss the various standards affecting the evaluation.** This can be determined from a needs assessment, ethics, and the law.

Topics to cover in periodic reports

Generally, periodic reports are produced quarterly or less frequently. They are designed to inform staff about the progress of the evaluation and to facilitate the research team’s efforts to keep the evaluation on track. These reports usually do not include analyses, partly because the statistical power is insufficient to detect changes due to the smaller number of participants. At different stages of the evaluation, the report will emphasize different facets of the project.

Early in the evaluation. One of the first reports will consist primarily of the evaluation design. Issues to address include the primary purpose for the evaluation, the design selected to answer the evaluation questions, the participants in the evaluation (e.g., pipeline-related data; see chapter 7), estimates of how many participants

are needed for the evaluation (derived from conducting a power analysis), the measures to be used, and the report's audience.

Midcourse and periodic reports.

Midcourse and periodic reports might address problems encountered in selecting participants and a comparison group, with possible solutions; updates and modifications to the evaluation design; baseline data comparisons; preliminary results, if available; and any followup surveys of participants.

Later in the experiment. Near the end of the study, the report can present preliminary analyses. In addition, the report can address quality control issues and reporting and publication options.

Topics to cover in a final evaluation report

The final evaluation report summarizes and disseminates the big picture. However, its content will depend heavily on its audience. A comprehensive final evaluation report will contain the components listed below.

The executive summary. The executive summary discusses the evaluation's overall purpose, findings, and implications.

The evaluation question. This section of the report discusses the authorization and justification for the evaluation. Include in this section references to any related studies that support the evaluation design or evaluation questions.

The design of the study. Describe the study design in detail. Include the sponsor of the evaluation, statistical power (the number of participants), the pipeline study (if applicable), eligibility criteria, recruitment procedures, a description of the participants, a description of logic models and if-then statements, outcome variables, and measurement methods.

The description of control or comparison groups. This section describes the selection of any control or comparison and treatment groups and how the control or comparison group is similar to or different from the treatment group (i.e., Child Advocacy Center (CAC) client participants).

Integrity of the design. This section of the report describes baseline data comparisons, eligibility-related data, participant acceptance rates, validity and reliability of the measures (standardized questionnaires should provide this information), changes in the design of the evaluation that occurred during the course of the study, attrition, and missing data.

Analyses and results. The analyses and results are typically presented simultaneously. First, discuss which type of analysis was performed, followed by the results of that analysis. Comparisons among groups or subgroup analyses (i.e., what works for whom) should be included here. Also include any limitations of the analyses and special problems, such as missing data.

Conclusions and implications. This section discusses the findings and interprets the results. The implications of the findings are important and must be specified for the reader. Also discuss how various internal and external factors that could not be measured might have affected the evaluation (see chapter 8).

Recommendations (when applicable). Typically, recommendations accompany an evaluation report and follow the section on implications because the recommendations emerge from the finding's implications.

References. Provide references or citations for any published or unpublished work used in the evaluation report.

Appendixes. A number of appendixes may be included in the evaluation report: survey questions, inventories, administrative reporting form(s), a copy of the informed consent form(s), and supporting statistical tables (if they are not in the text).

Public-use data file (if applicable). If your funding agency requires researchers to place their data in a public-use data depository, then specify in the report where the data can be accessed.

Presenting the Data

Several formats can be used to present the results of the evaluation:

- **Present both totals and subgroups in a table.** Present the data by subgroups broken down by relevant characteristics (e.g., gender, age, or racial groups), as well as by the whole sample. This kind of information is often more useful than a simple total. (Exhibit 11.3 shows a sample trauma symptom checklist for children.)
- **Present only subgroups in a table.** Present all of the results only by subgroups, such as gender, age, or racial groups.
- **Present comparison groups in a table.** Present the results by treatment and comparison group (see a sample in exhibit 11.4). Statistical computer packages have a cross-tabulations command to calculate this information automatically.
- **Present data visually by graphing the data.** Graphs tend to jump out at readers and capture their attention. However, a visible difference between two lines on a graph can occur because of chance alone and does not mean that there is a statistically significant difference between the two lines. Thus, the

text needs to explicitly interpret the graph for the reader.

Reviewing the Evaluation Report

An effective evaluation report will contain no surprises because all major issues will have been discussed among the team members, and group decisions will have been made before writing the evaluation report. To further prevent surprises, preliminary drafts of the evaluation report should be shared with the evaluation team to obtain their reactions to the report's content and style. The team may provide missing data and anecdotal information that may make the report more complete. The team should also have an opportunity to comment on the final draft of the report. Consider attaching a cover letter requesting team members and any external reviewers to answer the following questions:

- Do the findings seem reasonable?
- Are they presented clearly?
- What questions do they raise that are not answered in the report?
- Are explanations of problem areas and proposed remedies satisfactory?
- What other tables or charts would be helpful?
- Does anything seem to be missing, such as an overlooked outcome or influencing factor?

The statement of work may stipulate that the entire team must approve the evaluation report before it is released (Gunn 1987). After it has been approved by the entire evaluation team, release the report to the larger audience.

Disseminating the Report

How the report is disseminated will affect how it is written. Some funding sources may stipulate how the report is to be disseminated. If the evaluation is sponsored through a government or foundation grant, for example, the authority to release the report lies with the principal investigator (Boruch 1997). Different venues for disseminating the evaluation report will reach very different audiences:

- **Conference presentations.** Conference presentations allow delivery of the results of the evaluation to a potentially large and diverse audience.
- **Newspapers.** Newspaper notices regarding the evaluation can increase community awareness about the center.
- **Newsletters.** Publishing the evaluation report in a newsletter, such as the National Children's Alliance newsletter, notifies other centers of the evaluation activities. This method allows a large number of people to learn from the center's evaluation methods and results.
- **Open houses.** Invite the community to an open house at the center and display the results of the evaluation in several locations throughout the center. Both the open house and the display of the evaluation results will foster positive community relations.
- **Journals.** Depending on the evaluation, the results may be published in a journal. Journals that would be amenable to an evaluation report include *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *Child Maltreatment*, *The Advisor*, and *New Directions for Program Evaluation*. If unsure where to submit the evaluation, consult with a faculty member at a local university or with staff at the American Evaluation Association.

Presenting the report publicly

It is sometimes difficult to determine who will present the evaluation to a group of people, for example, at a conference. Thus, decide during planning who "owns" the evaluation data.

In some cases, a sole evaluator may be responsible for the evaluation. This person will know the evaluation data best and will be in the best position to present the report to the public. However, in some situations it may be preferable for the director (or some other team member) to present the report. The audience to whom the evaluation is being reported may dictate who should present the evaluation results.

Making the presentation

The evaluation report should be delivered in a manner consistent with the evaluation questions asked, although the specific information presented depends on the audience. Visual aids should accompany any presentation. The presentation should include the evaluation theory, the evaluation predictions (i.e., hypotheses), the design of the study (who participated, the measures used, and the timeline of the study), analyses and results, and implications and recommendations.

Discoverability of the evaluation report

Depending on State statutes, the evaluation report may be discoverable. That is, the report could be subpoenaed and used as evidence in legal proceedings against the center. As these statutes vary from State to State, the applicable law in the State must be identified.

Summary comments

This resource book was written to educate CAC administrators about evaluation and to encourage administrators to engage in evaluation. Evaluation is important because it is the only way to ensure that a program is benefiting, not harming, the people it is trying to help (Thompson and McClintock 1998). Furthermore, in this time of increased accountability, it is imperative that administrators arm themselves with data to support the contention that CACs are a beneficial method of processing child sexual abuse cases. Administrators have to be able to say more than “I know it works.”

With the publication of this manual, all CAC administrators can engage in some form of evaluation (program monitoring, outcome evaluation, or impact evaluation).

This resource book contains all the necessary tools to conduct an evaluation, either independently or with the assistance of an evaluation professional. For example, it provides CAC administrators with practical information on recruiting and retaining participants, collecting data, analyzing the data, and writing the evaluation report. In addition, this volume contains a large range of instruments for use in various types of evaluations. Although undertaking an evaluation can be challenging, the benefits of doing so far outweigh the challenges.

Note

1. Some centers share evaluation reports with the MDT and some do not. If the MDT is completing surveys, then it seems only fair that they should have access to the results. Spend 5 minutes at case review highlighting the results or give team members a one-page summary with bulleted results.